

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to L. Alonzo Butterfield, undated

422 L Alonzo Butterfield Ph D 52 Pickney Street Boston Mass Dear Mr Butterfield:—

I am very glad to hear from you again, after so long a silence.

I have never used my father's symbols as a means of teaching a standard pronunciation. I presume that my father's standard is the best that can be adopted. I have contented myself with teaching students to express their own pronunciation, whatever it may be, or any pronunciation, in symbols. You say "Am I wrong in writing with symbols as you taught me?" Yes; if you do not write your own pronunciation or pronounce as you have written the symbols.

For example, the indefinite article "a" is, by itself, pronounced [???]; but in a sentence when unaccented, as "a man", a "a boy", &c, it is pronounced with indefinite vowel quality, which I express with the voice glide [???]. Now if you always write the standard sound for "a" ([???]) and then don't pronounce it that way when you say "a man", &c, you are misusing the symbols. You should read "[???] man" "[???] boy" &c, in accordance with your writing. On the other hand, if you say, as I do, , then I believe you should write it so.

The niceties of articulation depend largely on the pronunciation of unaccented vowels; and yet nobody gives the standard pronunciation to such vowels in actual conversation. They all of them, under such circumstances, acquire a very indefinite vowel quality, and upon this very indefiniteness depends the naturalness of the speech. It is only pedantic speakers who give the standard sounds under such circumstances. To do so, in my opinion, constitutes a defect of articulation, not an excellency. Hence in my writing I take great liberty with unaccented vowels. I simply write my own pronunciation.

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My efforts have been directed to teaching pupils to give the correct sounds for the symbols, not to giving the correct symbols for standard sounds. My father would be the best guide on that matter.

Yours sincerely, Alexander Graham Bell